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One Library's Experience: Getting Organized with Serials Solutions

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Company Profile — Serials Solutions, LLC

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Got E-Journals? Get the Solution — Serials Solutions, That Is!!!

Founded by a reference librarian in Seattle, **Serials Solutions** is a new company which provides “one-stop shopping” for e-journals. They produce an alphabetical list of a libraries’ full-text electronic journals, pulled from all of the databases to which the library subscribes. The list is provided in HTML and print formats; in the HTML format, live links take the user directly to each journal. In this interview, founder **Peter McCracken** answers a few questions for *ATG* about what motivated him to create this company and how it compares to the competition. See the accompanying article for one library’s experience in dealing with **Serials Solutions** and a more detailed description of their product. — **Allison P. Mays**

What does Serials Solutions do, and how did it begin?

Serials Solutions was the first company to track the full-text electronic journals available through database aggregators. The idea came directly from my frustration at the reference desk of not knowing what we were paying for. We didn’t have a good way of tracking this information, and no way of updating what work we had done. **Serials Solutions** does this work inexpensively for everyone, and helps each library know what’s available to its staff and patrons. The company now has over 160 clients, from small community colleges and corporate libraries to major public libraries and **ARL** institutions. We are constantly guided by what librarians want, and we make a point of listening and responding to what people say they need.

The idea came from the reference desk, but the company came from a pitcher of beer. One night my youngest brother tried to get me, my wife, and our other brother to go out for a beer. It was like pulling teeth; I think it took him 45 minutes to get us to agree to go for “just one beer.” Over our first pitcher, I happened to tell them about this idea that I thought someone would implement soon. As it turned out, we closed down the bar while talking about this idea, and we realized that, together, we might have the skills to make it happen.

We thought that it would be pretty simple; we expected that the computer would be spitting out reports while we sat in the **Bahamas** sipping pinã coladas. Of course, it’s much more complex than we ever expected, and at the moment we track over 350 full-text databases, with some 800,000 pieces of discrete data. We have a full-time aggregator contact person, a full-time fulfillment person, and a rapidly growing tech crew, in addition to business development, sales, and customer service teams. It turns out to be an extremely complicated system, but we’ve done an excellent job of figuring it all out.

How do you manage work as a librarian with work as a vendor?

I don’t actually do too much of the **Serials Solutions** work; we’ve got a great group of people working on the **Serials Solutions** product, and I don’t have that much day-to-day contact with it, since I am still working in the library during the day. I work on it in the evenings, doing whatever I can then.

I was careful to discuss and clear the project with my library’s administration first. Scientists do this sort of thing all the time; I think it’s valuable for those of us in the humanities to pursue such mutually beneficial projects, too, when appropriate. This summer I got approval from my supervisor to try balancing my library work schedule in a manner that allows me to work two mornings a week on **Serials Solutions**.

How does your product compare with others out there?


Serials Solutions was the first company to provide libraries with individualized reports of the e-journals they have available, although librarians have had a few options for dealing with this problem.

The most common solution is an in-house database. This works well for li-

braries with very small collections, but rarely for larger ones. More often than not, home-grown solutions are not complete, rarely kept up-to-date, and when considering the staff time involved, very expensive.

The next most common alternative is **jake**, a cooperative project started at **Yale Medical School**. **Jake** is free and is an impressive project in many respects, but the data is not easily customized to individual institutions, and is getting old.

Two companies are also trying to solve this problem, but to our knowledge neither has yet delivered a product. One was founded by the son of one of our first clients. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, I suppose. The other is a venture capital-funded branch of **Teldan Information Systems**. Several members of our staff have experience in Seattle dot-bombs, so we’re wary of being beholden to VCs and their need for “liquidity events.” We continue to be innovators in this field, and because we place all relevant information about our product and pricing on our Web pages so that librarians can see it, we accept that our competitors can, as well.

In theory, this is a simple project. In fact, we have learned that it’s extremely complicated, and we believe that we are the only company that has proven its ability to accurately track and deliver the information librarians and their patrons need. 

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One Library’s Experience: Getting Organized with Serials Solutions

by **Allison P. Mays** (Acquisitions Librarian, Millsaps College, 1701 N. State Street, Jackson, MS 39210; Phone 601-974-1083) <maysap@millsaps.edu>

Thank heaven for *ATG* and **Katina’s Rumors** column!! I was leafing through my February 2001 issue and saw a blurb in **Rumors** about **Chuck Hamaker** being impressed

with a new company called **Serials Solutions**. I looked at their Website and knew right away I had stumbled onto something BIG: a way

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to manage our electronic journals. One nice, neat list. And at a very reasonable price. No more poking around through different databases trying to see if we had access to a particular e-journal title. In other words, I had found *The Answer to Prayer*. And after **Lynn Blair at Burrow Library, Rhodes College** gave it a ringing endorsement, I was sold.

Several things I liked right away: up-front pricing. None of that "what region are you in/how many FTEs do you have." **Peter McCracken**, the founder, apparently finds those games annoying and has insisted on a flat rate pricing. (See their Website for the price breakdown.) The personnel are also extremely easy to deal with and very helpful. They are constantly looking for ideas and ways to improve the product. Some new features they are considering are a subject breakdown and the ability to do keyword searching within the list. They are also putting together a list of free online journals which can be included with your journals.

The best thing about **Serials Solutions** is all you have to do is tell **Serials Solutions** which aggregators you subscribe to and they will go in with their magic software and produce the list. Amazingly, they have your e-journals list back to you in about a week. You get the report in HTML format which is loaded on your server and you can also get it in print; other customized options are available. **Serials Solutions** updates your e-journals list every other month and corrections/changes can easily be made.

On the **Serials Solutions Website**, you can see examples of libraries' lists; click on the "Library Partners" link.

Here are few examples of listings:

Journal of Educational Sociology is available from 1927 to 1963 in **JSTOR**.

Journal of Educational Thought is available from 1/1/1996 to present in **Wilson Select Plus**.

Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect is available [from 1/1/1995 to 1/1/1998 in **ProQuest Research Library**] [from 1996 to present in Library holdings]

Journal of Electronic Defense is available as follows: [from 6/1/1989 to present in **Expanded Academic ASAP, General Reference Center Gold**] [from 1/1/1997 to present in **ProQuest Research Library**] [from 1997 to present in Library holdings]

In the HTML version, the name of each aggregator is the live link. If a title is available in more than one database, each aggregator is listed separately. If print titles

are included, the library name is the link and it takes the user to the online catalog record for that title. If you include the start and end dates of your library's holdings, that information will be included.

Yes, that's right: you can include your print titles **FOR NO EXTRA CHARGE**. You can also include any electronic journals you get for free as part of a paper subscription. (To clarify: there are no fees or extra charges for this. If we get above 7,000 journals which is the cutoff for the lowest price, we'll get bumped into a higher price range.) For years the **Millsaps-Wilson Library** has produced a typed listing of all print subscriptions; to say this is tedious to update and produce is an understatement. With **Serials Solutions**, we will have one master list with all of our electronic and print journals, plus all of the "freebie" e-journals that come with our paper subscriptions.


The most difficult part of the process for us was getting a list of all our print journals together to give to **Serials Solutions**, but we feel it will be worth the effort so that all our journals, regardless of format, are in one easy-to-use list. Fortunately our print journals list was already in a spreadsheet, so it was just a matter of making some adjustments. The spreadsheet for **Serials Solutions** needs to include the ISSN, journal title, start date, end date and the holding URL. (You don't have to include the start and end dates unless you want to, but we did.) The holding URL is a link that automatically searches our catalog for the journal and displays the results; users can easily locate journals in the catalog and find their location in the library.

It was very time-consuming copying and pasting the ISSN from each **MARC** record into the spreadsheet, but we also double-checked the holdings and title entries while we had the catalog record displayed. The point of access into your library catalog can either be a search by ISSN or the title. We wanted to use the title because many of our very old serials do not have ISSNs. And by using the title to search, the catalog will pull up all variations. I had to do some cleanup because some titles had parenthetical phrases, punctuation marks, or abbreviations; we also had a problem with foreign publications. For any that wouldn't work as a title search, I used the ISSN as the access point.

Some other things to consider when creating a spreadsheet for Serials Solutions:

- We did not distinguish between microforms and print; small gaps were ignored and the two formats were treated as one entry. (However, the patron can tell what we have from the catalog record.)
- If you have a major gap, you can use separate entries like this: "Rolling Stone 1983-96" and "Rolling Stone current year only."

- For titles with acronyms, we used entries for both the acronym and the spelled-out title (i.e. "ABA Journal" and "American Bar Association Journal").

I just sent our list to **Serials Solutions** this morning so I have not seen the finished product except for the examples on their Website. I still have about 90 titles that are going to be messy and I'll have to add them later in the update. I'm sure there will be some bugs to work out but we're so looking forward to getting this list that we can hardly stand it. We think the students will love it. Our inter-library loan staff will also benefit; think of the time they will save not having to search through all of those databases! It's been so frustrating for us because we know library users are not using the e-journals as well as they could, simply because they don't know what we have. We are especially pleased about being able to include our print titles, although it was a lot of work. And I love it that a librarian came up with the solution - thanks, **Peter!** 

Note: I'll do an update once we get our list and let you know how it has been received by library patrons. If any other libraries would like to share their experiences, please let me know. — APM

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ting information online appears easy, but there is actually a great deal of skill involved. Librarians can help users to master this. Besides there is nothing that can replace the personal service and guidance that the library offers so well.

ATG: *Some book review editors report that the number of published reference sources is going down. Have you noticed such a decline?*

KAC: *Publisher's Weekly* continues to report that the publishing of reference books in print is thriving. I think we see about the same number of new titles as well as updates of older ones. Libraries as well as the general public still want to purchase reference titles in paper.

ATG: *Any parting observations about the future of library reference collections?*

KAC: Reference collections are indeed in flux. The advent of more electronic resources calls for more evaluation and more decision making. Just because it's electronic doesn't mean that it's better than the print version. Or if it's an electronic product, it doesn't mean that it's better than another print product. I think we should select carefully using all the principles we have always used. I think we will probably continue to have a mix of formats in the reference collection that can serve our users' needs well. 